AMERICAN CONSERVATIVES AND THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

by George Nash

Editor's Preview: To comprehend contemporary American conservatism, Dr. George Nash reminds us, we must understand it as a movement of ideas. In the aftermath of World War II, there was no "articulate, coordinated, conservative intellectual force" in the United States, but now, in the 1980s, it is liberalism which is in disarray. What ideas and events are responsible?

In this brief, cogent essay, Dr. Nash discusses the evolution of modern conservative thought and notes the growing influence of its scholars, journalists, politicians, and public following. Optimistic that the conservative phenomenon is no mere trend and will continue as a forceful presence in our affairs, Dr. Nash also cautions that "conservative ideas are not the only ideas in circulation." Success at the polls, even when it culminates in a presidential victory, does not guarantee that conservative theory will be implemented in the policies of an administration, much less create a predominantly or permanently conservative cultural consensus.

The nineteenth-century Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini once remarked, "Ideas rule the world and its events. A revolution is the passage of an idea from theory to practice. Whatever men say, material interests never have caused, and never will cause a revolution." In 1986 the United States is living in the era of what some have called the "Reagan Revolution." Such a description, of course, is to some extent hyperbole. But the use of that overworked word "revolution"—in Mazzini's sense—is, it seems to me, precisely correct: In America since 1981 we have been witnessing the passage of an idea from theory to practice. That idea, that philosophy, is called conservatism.

In this essay I wish to examine the roots of the current conservative resurgence—the principal configurations of thought and protest which have arisen to comprise the "Reagan Revolution." You will notice that I said "configurations of thought." My choice of words is deliberate, for conservatism in America in 1986 is fundamentally a movement of ideas. Like Mazzini, American conservatives since World War II have believed that ideas rule the world and its events. In the much-quoted words of one of the most influential conservative scholars of the postwar period, Professor Richard Weaver: "Ideas have consequences."

Curiously, it is the liberals—so many of whom inhabit academe and other locales where ideas, or at least words, are the medium of exchange—who in our recent history have often seemed unwilling to take ideas seriously. This indisposition helps to explain, I think, their difficulty in taking at face value the pronouncements of communists, Sandinista revolutionaries, and Islamic fundamentalists. Surely, liberals often argue, such people do not really mean what they say. It helps to explain the difficulty some liberals have in comprehending the nature of American conservatism: their tendency to perceive it not as an intellectual movement worthy of intellectual respect but as merely a front for greed and self-indulgence. It helps also to account for the astonishment many liberals felt when President Reagan first began to implement the ideas he enunciated during his 1980 campaign. To their sur-
prise, the man actually seemed intent upon keeping his promises.

To comprehend contemporary American conservatism, then, we must consider it as a movement of ideas. And to place this phenomenon in proper historical perspective, we need to turn not to events in the distant past but to currents which have developed and coalesced in the past generation.

In 1945 no articulate, coordinated, conservative intellectual force existed in the United States. There were, at the most, scattered voices of protest, profoundly pessimistic about the future of their country and convinced that they were a forlorn, isolated remnant, standing athwart history yelling “Stop!” Gradually during the first postwar decade these voices multiplied, acquired an audience, and began to generate an intellectual movement.

In the beginning there was not one right-wing renaissance but three, each reacting in diverse ways to challenge from the Left. The first of these groupings consisted of libertarians and classical liberals, resisting the threat of the ever-expanding State to individual liberty, free market capitalism, and individual initiative. Convincing in the 1940s that America was rapidly drifting toward expanded state planning and socialism—toward what Friedrich Hayek called “the road to serfdom”—these intellectuals offered a powerful defense of free market economics that achieved some influence by the mid-1950s. From men like Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Henry Hazlitt, and John Chamberlain in the 1940s and 1950s, to Milton Friedman and the Chicago School economists in the 1960s, to George Gilder, Arthur Laffer, and the supply-side economists in the 1980s, the libertarian conservatives—mostly economists—have produced a sophisticated defense of free market capitalism and have exerted enormous influence over the American Right. The Reagan administration’s policies of tax rate-cutting, deregulation, and encouragement of private sector economic growth are the direct product of this rich intellectual legacy.

Concurrently, and independently of the libertarians, a second school of non-liberal thought emerged in America in the first postwar decade: the “new conservatism” or “traditionalism” of such men as Richard Weaver, Peter Viereck, Robert Nisbet, and Russell Kirk. Shocked by totalitarianism, total war, and the development of secular, rootless, mass society during the 1930s and 1940s, the “new conservatives” (as they were then called) urged a return to traditional religious and ethical absolutes and a rejection of the moral relativism which had allegedly corroded Western values and produced an intolerable vacuum filled by demonic ideologies and pseudo-religions. More generally European-oriented and historically-minded than the classical liberals, the traditional conservatives extolled the wisdom of such European thinkers as Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville and called for a revival of Christian orthodoxy, classical natural law, premodern political philosophy, and mediating institutions between citizen and state.

Third, there appeared in the 1940s and 1950s a militant, evangelistic anti-communism, shaped decisively by a number of ex-communists and ex-Trotskyites of the 1930s including Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, Frank Meyer, and many more. It was also reinforced by a number of articulate anti-communist exiled scholars from eastern and central Europe, including Gerhart Niemeyer, Stefan Possony, and Thomas Molnar. These former men of the Left and their European emigre allies brought to the postwar Right a profound conviction that the West was engaged in a titanic struggle with an implacable adversary—communism—that sought nothing less than the conquest of the world.

Each of these emerging components of the conservative revival shared a deep antipathy to twentieth-century liberalism. To the libertarians, modern liberalism was the ideology of the ever-aggrandizing bureaucratic welfare state, which would, if unchecked, become the totalitarian state, destroying individual liberty and private property.

To the traditionalists, liberalism was a disintegrative philosophy which, like an acid, was eating away at the ethical and institutional foundations of traditional society, thereby creating a vast spiritual vacuum into which totalitarianism would enter. To the Cold War anti-communists, modern liberalism—rationalistic, relativistic, secular, anti-traditional, quasi-socialist—was by its very nature incapable of vigorously resisting an enemy on its Left. Liberalism to them was part of the Left and could not effectively repulse a foe with which it shared so many underlying assumptions. As James Burnham eventually put it, liberalism was essentially a means for reconciling the West to its own destruction. Liberalism was the ideology of Western suicide.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s these three in-
dependent wings of the conservative revolt against the Left began to coalesce. The movement found its first popular embodiment in the editor of National Review, William F. Buckley, Jr., who, apart from his extraordinary talents, personified each impulse in the developing coalition. He was at once a traditional Roman Catholic, a defender of the free market, and a staunch anti-communist (a source of his ecumenical appeal to conservatives).

Politically, the postwar American Right as I have described it found its first national expression in the campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater for the presidency of the United States in 1964. From the perspective of twenty-two years it is now clear that the 1964 election had for capitalism instead of three. In any case, one of the salient developments of the past decade has been the intellectual journey of various liberals and social democrats toward conservative positions.

The stresses that have produced this migration have been many. In part, neoconservatism may be interpreted as the recognition that good intentions alone do not guarantee good governmental policy and that the actual consequences of liberal social activism in the 1960s and 1970s have often been devastating. In considerable measure neoconservatism is also a reaction of moderate liberals to the polarizing upheavals of the 1960s, and particularly to the rise of the New Left, with its tendency to blame America first for world tensions and its neoisola-

three enduring consequences. First, it created the huge Democratic congressional majorities which permitted enactment of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program. Second, it led to conservative capture of the Republican Party. And third, it created a national political figure in Ronald Reagan, whose eloquent television speech for Goldwater on the eve of the election led directly to his becoming a candidate for governor of California two years later.

It was not long after the 1964 election that a new impulse appeared on the intellectual/political scene, one destined to become the fourth component of today's conservative coalition. I refer to the phenomenon of neoconservatism. Irving Kristol's definition conveys its essence: "A neoconservative," he says, "is a liberal who has been mugged by reality." According to another definition, a neoconservative is one who utters two cheers for capitalism instead of three. In any case, one of the salient developments of the past decade has been the intellectual journey of various liberals and social democrats toward conservative positions.

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identify one other crucial constituent in the conservative coalition of the 1980s: the so-called New Right. In its origins the New Right was not primarily an intellectual phenomenon at all. It was and largely remains a grassroots movement of protest—protest by aroused citizens, many of them religious fundamentalists and evangelicals. While the New Right activists generally share the foreign policy and economic perspectives of other conservatives, their primary interest lies elsewhere: in issues like abortion, pornography, prayer in the public schools, school busing, drug abuse, and crime. Their concerns, in short, center on the realm of social and moral conduct. Convinced that American society is in a state of potentially irreversible moral decline, convinced that secular humanism—in other words, modern liberalism—is the cause of this decay, the New Right populists are seeking to use the power of government to help protect their families, neighborhoods, and traditional moral values—or, at the very least, to keep the power of secularized government from subverting all that they hold dear.

In a very real sense the New Right is closest in its concerns to traditionalist conservatism. But whereas the traditionalist conservatives of the 1940s and 1950s were academics in revolt against rootless, mass society, the New Right is a revolt by the “masses” against powerful liberal elites.

To understand the conservatism of the Reagan administration, then, it is useful to perceive it as a product of the five distinct impulses that I have sketched in this essay. And as with William F. Buckley, so, too, with Ronald Reagan: Part of their success as spokesmen for conservatism derives from their embodiment of all these impulses simultaneously. One might even in a sense label Mr. Reagan a premature neoconservative because about thirty years ago he was a liberal Democrat.

And as these disparate elements have fused into a political as well as intellectual force, we have begun to witness a “revolution” in Mazzini’s sense: the passage of an idea from theory to practice. In this context several developments of the Reagan era deserve comment. Perhaps the most immediately noticeable feature of conservative intellectual activity in the past five years is that there has been so much of it. The publication of conservative books, essays, articles, and syndicated columns—already substantial in the 1970s—has attained the proportions of an avalanche.

This cascade of conservative literature is intimately linked to a second recent trend of consequence, the development of a burgeoning network of conservative media, foundations, and research centers. One thinks of the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute. One thinks of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Manhattan Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University, the Shavano Institute at Hillsdale College, the Committee for the Free World, the Institute for Educational Affairs, and literally dozens more. One thinks also of the emergence of influential conservative public interest law firms and of the astonishing recent growth of journalist “transmission belts” for conservative thought. Policy Review, the Claremont Review of Books, Persuasion at Work, Continuity, This World, The National Interest, and others, all founded since the late 1970s, have joined National Review, Human Events, and the American Spectator on the battleground of ideas. Without the ideas, the clan, and the personnel that these institutions have provided, the Reagan administration as a conservative administration would not exist.

To a historian the proliferation of such institutions suggests two things. First, and most obviously, it suggests prosperity. No longer are conservative intellectuals a pitifully scattered remnant, the pariahs of the academic world. There are now enough of them to permit this array of institutions to flourish. Second, and more importantly, it suggests continuity and future survival. Clearly the conservative phenomenon is not some passing spasm of materialistic acquisitiveness (as some hostile commentators hope) but one likely to contribute to our public discourse for some time to come. In fact, in one area—the identification and cultivation of legal talent through the medium of the Federalist Society—the conservative movement is directly contributing to what may yet be the most enduring legacy of the Reagan Revolution: the reorientation of the American judiciary.

With intellectual maturity has come a perceptible change in the texture and focus of recent conservative literature. It seems to this historian that conservatism has become less theoretical and introspective in recent years and more interested in concrete issues of public policy. Largely gone now is the restless quest for self-definition and philosophic coherence that has animated so much conservative writing since World War II. Indeed, if there has been a characteristic mode of conservative expression in the past five years, it has not been the rarefied tome of political philosophy or cultural criticism; it has been, above all, the policy study. It is another way of saying that we have entered the era of applied conservatism, the transition from theory to practice.

And as this has occurred, Washington, DC—once the forbidden city for American conservatives—has become instead an alluring Mecca—bustling with what Theodore White has labeled “action intellectuals,” proponents of what the Washingtonian magazine recently called “idea power.” If the Reagan presidency accomplishes little else, it will have effected (in the words of a Heritage Foundation official) “the credentialing of a new generation” of American conservatives, prepared by administrative experience in this conservative administration to serve at higher levels in the next. As the network of institutions that I described a moment ago expands and interlocks, as the “third generation” of young conservative activists finds its niche on Washington terrain, we are witnessing the emergence of something barely conceivable a decade ago: a conservative governing class. It is one indication
that the American Right is here to stay.

Intellectual vitality, the proliferation of supporting institutions, the increasingly practical focus of conservative writing, the birth of a conservative Washington establishment—to these developments I would add one more. For half a century now in American history, from the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt to the New Frontier of John Kennedy to the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, many observers have noticed the symbiosis of academe with the American Left. Since the early 1960s the steady "intellectualization" of our politics has extended to, and helped to transform, the American Right. About thirty-two years ago Senator Robert Taft was asked whether he had read Russell Kirk's book *The Conservative Mind*, one of the formative works of the postwar conservative renaissance. "No," the Senator responded and added with a chuckle, "You remind me of [James] Thurber's *Let Your Mind Alone.*" Senator Taft remarked that he was a politician, not a philosopher. Today, a generation later, the Republican Party is assiduously cultivating the "philosophers," and some of its candidates for president in 1988 are already publishing articles in conservative journals of opinion. This is a remarkable change.

And so in the mid-80s the historical trends that I identified earlier have reached a kind of climax. This is the moment of conservative opportunity, the era when—for the first time in half a century—principled conservatives have gained access to executive power. No observer of this phenomenon can fail to detect a feeling of having arrived among those who once felt beleaguered and ignored. It is a feeling conveyed by Jean Kirkpatrick's recent remark about the political opposition: "The Democrats are in a real bind. They won't get elected unless things get worse, and things won't get worse unless they get elected."

And yet I cannot leave it at that. It is increasingly apparent that despite its new sense of legitimacy the conservative movement in 1986 is afflicted by a spreading sense of unease. Well into the second term of the most receptive administration in recent history, what, some conservatives are asking, has fundamentally been accomplished? The sanctity of the status quo has been undermined, to be sure, but have its contours been altered very much? This mood is accentuated by the sobering awareness that Ronald Reagan—the man who has held the five-part conservative coalition together—will be leaving office in less than three years and that no heir apparent has yet been found to replace him.

In part these sentiments reflect the collapse of the American Right's perhaps excessive expectations of 1981. Consider these statistics. When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, the United States Senate contained 59 Democrats and only 37 Republicans. The House of Representatives was even more overwhelmingly Democratic: 312 to 123. So subservient was Congress to FDR during the first hectic days of the "Roosevelt Revolution" that some New Deal legislation was enacted virtually without debate.

It is well to remember facts like these when pondering why a "Reagan Revolution" of similar dimensions has not occurred in the 1980s. Unlike Roosevelt, President Reagan has never enjoyed unquestioned mastery of Congress. (Think of what he might have achieved if he had commanded a 3 to 1 majority in the House.) Clearly the possibilities for a swift transformation of American public life were limited at the outset of the Reagan presidency. Unlike Roosevelt, Reagan confronts today a political opposition that—however dispirited at first—has not been thoroughly routed from the corridors of power. Nor have his opponents lost their influence in such crucial sectors as the media, the universities, and the judiciary. For all the euphoria generated by the 1980 election returns, principled conservatives entered Washington in 1981 a minority among the policy making, policy shaping elite. As a result, the Reagan administration has been obliged to struggle incessantly—even within itself—to implement just a portion of the conservative agenda.

This is not to say that the struggle has always been waged effectively. Mistakes have been made and opportunities lost. While it is too early to write a history of the Reagan administration, its experience thus far has demonstrated anew two axioms: 1) If you desire fundamentally to reshape the future, do not overpopulate your ranks with managers of the status quo. "People," as Edwin Feulner has said, "are policy." 2) And if ever there is a time for daring, it is the first six months of a presidential term of office. This is the period when popular forbearance is greatest and constraints on presidential initiatives are weakest. In short, as Clement Atlee once put it, strike while your mandate is hot. There will be time enough for a policy of incrementalism later on.

But the current conservative malaise goes deeper than the epiphenomena of legislative and bureaucratic maneuvers. Within the movement itself certain tactical and even philosophic tensions persist, threatening at times to rupture the conservative coalition. To some on the Right, for instance, the neoconservatives—the ex-liberal Democrats of a generation ago—seem too willing to accommodate to the essential tenets of the welfare state and seem congruent with the larger conservative movement in only one area: foreign policy. To other conservatives, long preoccupied with economic and geopolitical issues, the concerns of the largely Christian New Right seem of secondary importance and, in any case, of limited political appeal. For most of the post-1945 period American conservatism has been essentially an intellectual movement attempting to influence politics from above, so to speak, by colonizing and educating the "new class" elite. The New Right, however, is essentially an anti-elitist attempt to influence our politics from below. There is no necessary incompatibility between these two approaches, but it remains to be seen whether the Republican Party—the political vehicle of conservatism—
will be hospitable to both of them in the post-Reagan era.

And lurking in the background—particularly among some traditionalists—is a concern of another sort: that conservatism in the 1980s (as a friend of mine recently put it) “has been reduced to politics,” deprived of its ethical vision, and deflected from its larger mission of cultural renewal.

It is an apprehension worth meditating upon. For if ideas have consequences, then candor compels us to recognize that conservative ideas are not the only ideas in circulation in 1986. In the past decade and a half, significant sectors of America have not moved to the Right but to the Left, even as the conservative resurgence has gained momentum. Particularly in the area of culture and “lifestyles”—of drug use, sexual mores, acceptance of pornography, and tastes in popular music and literature—popular attitudes have shifted noticeably toward permisivism, and recent signs of reversal seem marginal.

Ask yourselves this: If the conservative understanding of communism were truly dominant in America today, would there have been a summit conference in Geneva? Would there be a so-called “sanctuary” movement of increasing proportions in the churches? Would there be fatuous “exchange” programs under which supposedly typical Soviet citizens come to places like Iowa, ride down the Mississippi River on steamboats, visit farms and Olympic wrestling coaches, and proclaim their devotion to world peace? The books and articles roll off the conservative presses, the networks of conservative influence multiply, the institutionalization of the conservative impulse proceeds. Yet in many parts of Middle America, and especially among the culture-forming, value-shaping institutions of our society—the media, the mainstream churches, the popular news magazines, the organs of art, music, and entertainment—the voice of organized conservatism remains weak. One is left to contemplate the irony that the conservative intellectual movement—so anti-establishment and anti-Washington in its origins—is now perhaps better organized in our nation’s capital than it is in the country at large.

It is not my purpose here to predict or prescribe the future of the American Right. But if my analysis of its development is correct, two final observations seem warranted. First, we would do well to remember that although the conservative movement since 1945 has been an intellectual movement, it has not (I repeat) been simply an intellectual movement in a cloistered, academic sense. Its goal from the first has been not merely to understand the world but to change it. To fulfill its purpose it must succeed not only in the realm of conferences, seminars, and academic quarters, but also in the arena of politics. The transition from theory to practice that occurred in 1981 was therefore both necessary and desirable.

At the same time, politics is not the only sphere in which “the battle of the intellect,” as the historian Paul Johnson has called it, must be fought. More than half a century ago Ortega y Gasset remarked, “The simple process of preserving our present civilization is supremely complex, and demands incalculably subtle powers.” What is just and admirable about the civilization of America and the West? Why is this civilization worth defending? Why is a regime of liberty superior to the tyrannies that today oppress so much of the earth? To some the answers to these questions may seem self-evident, but for far too many people—including many Americans—they are not. The successful defense of our civilization at this level is not primarily a task for policy makers. Politics is only the art of the possible; it is up to other conservatives—intellectuals, clergymen, and opinion-molders of all kinds—to expand the sphere of political possibility and to refine the public sentiment which will make conservative statesmanship successful. Neither vocation, then—the political or the scholarly—should be neglected; there is room, there is need, for both.

Will, then, the “Reagan Revolution” triumph? Here I, as an historian, not a prophet, must stop. For the moment the conservative intellectual movement in America, born in the wilderness a generation ago, has achieved an unprecedented level of influence. But the conservative ascendancy is fragile and incomplete, and tomorrow belongs automatically to no one. If the conservative coalition is to prosper, it must resist the tendency to fragment and the temptation to retreat into an energizing passivity, induced by overconfidence, exhaustion, or despair. Let not the words of an unknown poet become its epitaph:

On the plains of hesitation
Bleach the bones of countless millions
Who, at the dawn of victory,
Sat down to rest,
And, resting, died.